

The Okavango Delta by air, land and lagoon

A dream safari may be more affordable than you think



Liisa Atva

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Lions on the road in the Okavango Delta. *LIISA ATVA*

.I was ten feet away from three lions lying on the road! And there was nothing between us – no bars, cages or glass.

“Don’t worry,” said the guide. “They don’t look hungry and they don’t see the Land Cruiser with us in it as food. But don’t make any sudden movements and don’t get out.”

Our vehicle was the only one in sight that morning in the Khwai Game Reserve, deep in Botswana's Okavango Delta. Herds of red lechwe, impala and springbok leaped across the grassy savannah, a troop of baboons with babies clambered among the nearby trees, and a pack of Wild African Dogs, with their comical ears and beautiful mottled fur, studied us.



African Wild Dog *LIISA ATVA*

In addition to the pride of lions, we'd already seen a parade of elephants, a tower of giraffes, a dazzle of zebras, a bloat of hippos, and a confusion of wildebeest.

The imaginative names for groups of animals that we learned from our guide were so aptly descriptive. Wildebeests, for example, are often afflicted with a parasite that gets into their brain, causing them to run in

twenty-foot circles shaking their heads.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

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Many countries in Africa boast games reserves but what makes Botswana special is its approach to tourism – low volume/low impact. The number of safari camps and the number of people they can accommodate are regulated in order to minimize the impact on the environment and wildlife.



On safari near Mopiri Camp *STEVE STOCKAHL*

A popular itinerary is to spend three or four days at two at different camps. I visited Roots & Journeys' Mopiri Camp in the northwestern edge of the Okavango Delta, and Nokanyana in the east near the Khwai and Moremi Game reserves.

Both camps utilized solar power and when out in the bush the guides instructed us not to leave so much as a tissue behind. Botswana banned hunting in 2014 and now boasts the largest population of elephants (130,000) in the world. (However, Botswana is currently mulling a proposal to lift the ban, sparking a global outcry.)

My adventure began in the town of Maun, the staging point for the surrounding safari camps. The base for more than 100 small planes, it's a mecca for pilots from around the world accumulating flying hours.

I climbed aboard a six-seat Cessna with a young female pilot from New Zealand – as far as I could see was low-lying jungle, winding water channels and open tracts of land lined with elephant trails.



The Okavango Delta as seen by air. *LIISA ATVA*

We flew low enough that I could see lions, with their heads lowered, stealthily creeping towards a herd of impala only four or five leaps away. Yet we were high enough that none of the animals even looked up.

After landing on the gravel runway near Mopiri, I was met by Chilli B, my guide for the stay. From there it was a ten-minute motorboat ride on a lake-sized lagoon to the main lodge where we were greeted with song in Se Tswana, the native language of the welcoming committee.

In both camps my accommodation was a tent with an ensuite, boasting both an indoor and outdoor shower, and far enough away from the other tents to indulge in the later. Given its spacious luxury, king-sized bed and wooden floors, the only tent-like feature was the canvas sides and roof.



The only thing tent like about Mopirit tents is the canvas covering. *LIISA ATVA*

Alone in my tent at night at Nokanyana, I listened to a symphony of sound; crickets, frogs, the deep-throated roar of a lion, hippos grunting, and the screech of hyenas making a kill.

“Animals might wander by your tent during the night but they won’t come in,” I was assured by Chandré. “But should you need it there is an air horn by the bed.”

Strangely I wasn’t scared. The only eerie moments were being woken up several times during the night by the complete and utter silence. Why did every insect and animal decide not to make noise at the exact same time?

At Nokanyana my days were filled with wildlife safaris, and a visit to the nearby village where we chatted with the local children who were as curious about us as we were of them. They don’t venture far from their homes at night, they told us, because wild animals roam the roads.



Nokanyana lodge. *JAMES GIFFORD*

At Mopiri Camp I cruised the lagoon and papyrus fringed river channels with Chilli B by motorized boat and mokoro, a traditional dugout canoe.

The Delta is a birders paradise and home to 500 species. Under the expert tutelage of my guide, I learned to identify many different birds including; African Fish Eagle, Marabou Stork, Pel's Fishing Owl, Little Bee Eater, various Egrets, the Sociable and Golden Weaver, and the Secretary bird with its long legs. My favourite was the African Jacana, also known as a Lily-trotter for its ability to delicately skip atop the Lotus pads.



The African Jacana, also known as a Lily-trotter for its ability to delicately skip atop the Lotus pads. *LIISA ATVA*

Also fascinating were the ubiquitous termite towers – up to two meters high. I had mistakenly assumed that termites eat only wood, and given the number of termites these towers could house was amazed that there was a tree left standing. But no, these are fungus termites and the towers are huge fungi factories, an important ecological feature of the Delta and the genesis of many of its islands. The Okavango is also renowned for fishing, but I was a few weeks too early for the season.



Termite mound *LIISA ATVA*

At both locations the meals were excellent and plentiful: a hot buffet at breakfast and lunch, high tea with sweets and savouries in the afternoon and four course candlelit dinners in the evening.

My favourite dinner from the menu developed by a French-trained chef was the African Chicken Marula; brined and pan fried chicken served with a cream sauce incorporating the unique tart flavour of the local Marula fruit, also a favourite of elephants.

If you go

Camp operator [Roots & Journeys](http://www.rootsandjourneys.com) (<http://www.rootsandjourneys.com>) provides a five-star experience for a three-star price. I was there during their rainy, quiet season. However, it's a matter of perspective, coming from Vancouver, Botswana in February with temperatures in the low 30s (Celsius), and rain once in the eight days I was there, was a delight. Perhaps I'd just been lucky: apparently it had rained for part of the day for several days before I arrived.



A mokoro ride on one of the waterways in the Okavango Delta. *LIISA ATVA*

The most popular time to visit the Okavango Delta is from May to November and many safari camps are fully booked months in advance. The water level in the Delta is at its highest, a result of water from rains in the Angola highlands months earlier finally making their way there. When the water level rises the animals are forced onto a shrinking landmass. I imagine the resulting concentration of wildlife must be spectacular.

Travelling during their rainy season is cheaper. However rainy season is a matter of perspective, coming from Vancouver, Botswana in February with temperatures in the low 30s (Celsius), and rain once in the eight days I was there, was a delight. Perhaps I'd just been lucky: apparently it had rained for part of the day for several days before I arrived.



n the Delta it is possible to see the iconic “big five.” *LIISA ATVA*

During my visit we didn’t have to venture far to find animals. In the Delta it is possible to see the iconic “big five” – lion, elephant, buffalo, leopard, and rhinoceros – however, as they are more rare, I didn’t encounter a crash of rhinos.

At the time of my visit a flight from Vancouver to Botswana, with a little shopping around, could be had for CAD \$1,300, and the low season all inclusive rate at Roots & Journeys’ camp was US \$370 a night per person, (US \$578 high season). The total cost for a six-night stay, including three internal flights – Maun to Mopiri, to Nokanyana and back to Maun – is less than US \$3,000.



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